

# Soldiers

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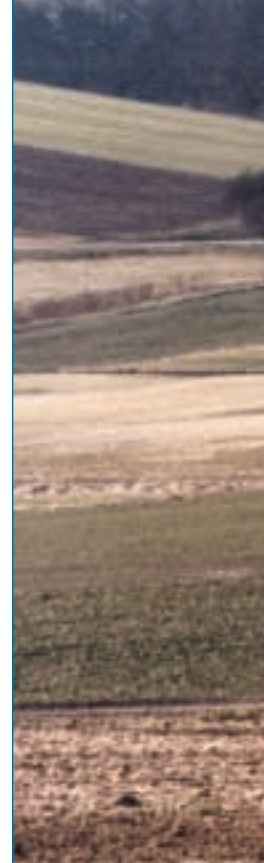


**Schweinfurt, Germany**

Home station of  
the 1st Squadron,  
4th Cavalry.



**Good communications were essential to keeping every element of the 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav., linked together during the realistic training exercise.**



# TROOP

# CHALLENGE 2000

**Story and Photos by MSG Larry Lane**

**This year the German government granted the U.S. Army permission to "train on the economy," that is, to hold a force-on-force exercise using local farms and small towns as a backdrop for the training. It was the first such opportunity in more than a decade.**

**T**HE first morning of training went well for SFC Rick Michalec's platoon. A couple of OH-58 Kiowa Warrior helicopters had spotted the opposing force's armor hiding in the hills to ambush a squadron of Bradley fighting vehicles and tanks as they passed through the unfamiliar valley. Guided by the Kiowas, Michalec's platoon had destroyed the enemy.

"There's an OPFOR out here that has gone through the same scout training as us, so there's a little rivalry," Michalec said. "They're really going out of their way to get us, and we're really going out of our way to prevent them from doing that. Every time our vehicle stops, our dismounts are out on the ground, clearing the

wood lines for us, providing rear security and dismounted observation posts."

The OPFOR often seems to have the upper hand in exercises held in training areas such as the Combat Maneuvering Training Center in Hohenfels, Germany, or the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. But this year the German government granted the U.S. Army permission to "train on the economy," that is, to hold a force-on-force exercise using local farms and small towns as a backdrop for the training. It was the first such opportunity in more than a decade.

Troop Challenge, held outside the Schweinfurt home station of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, provided the squadron a more challenging and realistic environment than found in some of the local training sites, as soldiers navigated through tight towns

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Its turret turned to protect its flank, a 1st Sqdn. Bradley slowly moves off an open field.



A 1st Sqdn. Abrams commander carefully navigates his 70-ton M1A1 through the small town of Massbach, Germany, attracting much attention from local citizens. Such scenes have been rare since the suspension of the REFORGER exercises.

and over muddy farm lands.

“You actually have to navigate,” Michalec said. “If you go to some of our local training areas, they’re so small and people have been through them so many times, you don’t need a map. You know where the enemy is coming from because they always come from the same spot. Out here,

you’ve got to fight the terrain.”

One advantage from the exercise was the ability for the entire squadron to be deployed in realistic, doctrinal distances, said squadron commander LTC H. R. McMaster. The training areas are limited in maneuvering space and can’t realistically provide the command and control and logistical

challenges the squadron would face over long distances.

“Here, we’re able to experience all the friction associated with operating over doctrinal distances,” McMaster said. “And we have the friction associated with changes in orders and our ability to respond to unanticipated conditions.”



**A platoon's mobile operations center tracks the battle on maps of an area the unit has never used for maneuvering.**

McMaster said the limited confines of the tired local training areas and the limits of battle simulations technology can create “bad habits” over time.

“On the computer, every little icon goes precisely where it’s supposed to go. Every computer and every icon on the computer is extremely ‘well trained.’ Communications are never a problem.”

Troop Challenge tested each of the squadron’s battle systems, McMaster said, from the lone dismounted team in the woods providing security, to the complexity of how helicopters and ground forces work together.

Maneuver-damage concerns prevented the aggressive maneuvering typical of tanks and Bradleys when reacting to enemy contact, but soldiers gained a better understanding of their jobs and how they fit into the squadron’s larger mission, McMaster said.

“The big payoff will not only be in terms of our ability to maneuver together, but the psychological payoff that comes from knowing that you trained in peacetime under the same conditions that you may face in combat,” he said.

When rolling such large vehicles

**“It’s definitely a big challenge for the soldiers. They can have first-hand experience with civilians coming out and taking a look, and possible maneuver damage as they go through the towns. You’ll experience that kind of contact with civilians in war.”**

through small German towns and around farmers’ fields, some damage was expected. Soldiers knew they would sometimes have to sacrifice cover and concealment and stick to the roads to avoid digging up farmlands. Drivers finessed tanks through tight corners in towns where spectators, hearing about the possibility of armor rolling through their community, had gathered beside the road to wave. Maneuver-damage assessment teams remained ready to record damage and

in some cases used shovels and brooms to help clean up the roads.

CPT Jason Wolter, B Troop commander, said his sergeants and specialists were key to the unit’s success in the exercise.

“There were times throughout the operation when I didn’t see the guys for quite a while,” Wolter said. Soldiers got little sleep for the three days of continuous training, but were expected to make quick decisions on their own.

“When things get a little difficult, they have to knuckle down and get the job done on their own. That really places emphasis on the soldiers in the hatch, doing what’s right, making sure their sector sketches are right. Those are the guys who make it happen,” he said.

Wolter looked at the squadron’s upcoming 2001 deployment to Kosovo and said the exercise emphasized the skills the squadron would need, whether operating in peacetime or wartime.

“Whether they’re running a tank or a checkpoint in Mitrovica, it’s still the same thing; responsibility at their own level, doing their precombat inspection checks, making sure their soldiers are



**Vehicles participating in exercise Troop Challenge used paved roads whenever possible to avoid damaging farmland in the exercise areas.**

ready to go,” he said.

Troop Challenge provided the type of realistic maneuvering training that soldiers may not be receiving at the known training centers, said 1SG Francis Hayden and SFC Michael Vician. Both soldiers have experienced several rotations at the CMTC and have participated in “REFORGERs,” the annual large-scale maneuvering exercises held throughout Germany in the 1980s. Both said the exercise provided essential training that might have been lost when REFORGER exercises were discontinued.

“You get to train in the same environment that you would be in if you were in combat,” Hayden said. “We’re navigating through the countryside and rolling through towns. There are a lot of sharp turns, especially trying to get a tank through a little town. These are some of the things the soldiers are learning out here.”

Hayden said the German countryside resembled the terrain of Bosnia and Kosovo, the current areas of responsibility for the 1st Infantry Division.

“The first sergeant and I have been to Hohenfels many, many times and we can probably go without a map,” Vician said. “When you get into something like this, it’s challenging, even for the senior NCOs.

“It’s definitely a big challenge for the soldiers. They can have firsthand

experience with civilians coming out and taking a look, and possible maneuver damage as they go through the towns. You’ll experience that kind of contact with civilians in war.”

One tank broke a track in the middle of a small town’s main intersection, creating a challenging, unexpected training scenario for the tankers to work through. The tank had been going around a tight corner only to find a vehicle parked in its path. When the tank made a quick move to avoid the vehicle, one of the tracks snapped.



**A 1st Sqdn. tank crew repairs a broken track, attracting much attention from local farmers. The tank broke down in the middle of the main intersection, providing the crew with a realistic scenario.**

“This turn is a little sharper than what I’ve usually been through,” said SSG Hector R. Meza Jr.

As the team worked on repairing the track, the soldiers ran through what their responses would be if the same thing had happened in the Balkans. Security would have to be provided while the crew repaired the tank. They would have to spot possible locations where snipers might be positioned.

“You have to be more aware of your surroundings, like where a kill site could be in a town,” Meza said. “Right here, the main gun has the ability to traverse left and right, but we could be in a tight spot that might take our firepower away.”

The broken track was eventually repaired, but not until after attracting a crowd of townspeople who seemed willing to lend a hand in the work.

Troop Challenge provided the cavalry soldiers with realistic training in a challenging environment, McMaster said. The training could easily transfer from peacetime to wartime mission, he said.

“Our mission is to go to war as the reconnaissance and security force of the 1st Inf. Div.,” McMaster explained. “While the division’s main effort may be focused on a different kind of mission, those of us not currently deployed to Kosovo have to be prepared for the situation in the Balkans to escalate, or for contingencies elsewhere.” □